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Preventive educational programs are potentially useful in reducing the effects of divorce on children and families. Parenting After Divorce is an ongoing study designed to evaluate preventive programs. Divorcing families with children aged 7-12 are identified from court records and contacted to participate. Families are randomly assigned to one of four educational programs: parent group, family education, child group, or self-study. Assessment of parent, child, and family functioning involves multiple measures including self-report questionnaires of child self-esteem, anxiety, and understanding of divorce; parent anxiety and depression; parent report of child behavior; videotaped observation of family play; and a school questionnaire. Preliminary data analysis on 60 families suggested that at pre-test, an average of 13 months after separation, most of the sample children were functioning normally in terms of self-esteem and anxiety. Parents reported that 56% of the children had a clinically significant number of problem behaviors. Parents were more unhappy than the general population. At post-test, the overall sample of children had fewer problem behaviors and less anxiety, while parent anxiety and sadness remained stable. Analysis of between group differences in interventions and follow-up of families is in progress. The preliminary data challenge the assumption that divorce is always pathogenic for children. (Author/AG)

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PARENTING AFTER DIVORCE:
EVALUATION OF PREVENTIVE PROGRAMS FOR DIVORCING FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Preventive educational programs are potentially useful in reducing the effects of divorce on children and families. Parenting After Divorce is an ongoing study designed to evaluate preventive programs. Divorcing families with children aged 7-12 are identified from court records and contacted to participate. Families are randomly assigned to one of four educational programs: Parent group, Family education, Child group, or Selfstudy. Assessment of parent, child and family functioning involves multiple measures, including self report questionnaires of child self esteem, anxiety, and understanding of the divorce, parent anxiety and depression, parent report of child behavior, videotape observation of family play, and a school questionnaire.

Preliminary data analysis suggests that at pre-test, an average of 13 months after separation, most of our sample children are functioning normally in terms of self esteem and anxiety. 56% of the children are reported by their parents to have a clinically significant number of problem behaviors. Parents are more unhappy than the general population at pre-test as well. At post-test, the overall sample of children showed fewer problem behaviors and less anxiety, while parent anxiety and sadness remained stable. Analysis of between group differences in interventions and follow-up of families is in progress. In summary, we appear to be reaching a sample of normal divorcing families who are seeking wide ranging support in the face of continuing family conflict and need. However, our data challenges the assumption that divorce is always pathogenic for children.

INTRODUCTION

Marital separation and divorce are increasingly common in families with children. An estimated 30-40% of all families with children will be affected by divorce or separation in the next decade (Bane, 1976). Clinical research studies with families of divorce have described the reactions of the children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974, 1975, 1979; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976), while others have suggested ways to intervene to ease the transition from a two parent family to a stable single parent home (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977; Weiss, 1975; Kessler, 1978; Ricci, 1980). However, it is only recently that research studies have been initiated which assess the effectiveness of interventions with families going through divorce (Thiessen, Avery & Joaning, 1980).

Divorce is a process, rather than simply an event in time, and requires complex adjustments for all involved. Detaching marital bonds (Weiss, 1975), role redefinition (Kitson & Raschke, 1981), adapting parenting style to fit the single parent and coparental relationship (Ricci, 1980; Galper, 1978), as well as personal adaptation are required for both children and adults. Research also suggests that the period of adjustment can be as long as two to three years after separation (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979; Kurdeck & Seisky, 1980). Reduced interparent hostility (Jacobson, 1979) and continued regular contact with both parents (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977; Jacobson, 1978) are also important factors for the children.

The Parenting After Divorce project is designed to compare the effectiveness of four preventive educational programs for divorcing parents and their children. The programs are designed to support the single parent or child, provide education about the process of divorce and typical reactions of family members, and give information about ways to reduce interparent conflict. Funded for a three-year period by the National Institute of Mental Health, the research is beginning its third year. In this paper, we will present some preliminary findings from this ongoing research project.

METHOD

Subjects

Potential participants are identified from court records of all recent divorces filed in a four county area in central North Carolina. In this state, couples have to be separated at least 12 months before filing for divorce. Single (custodial) parents with at least one child 7-12 years of age are contacted by letter and by phone within three months of their filing date. Families come from a wide range of economic and social backgrounds, and the four county area sampled includes both urban and rural farming and mill-town areas. Subjects are not help-seeking, and those in need of therapeutic services are referred elsewhere. Families with a child currently in therapy are ineligible for participation as well.

Measures

Multiple outcome measures are given to the single parent and children at three different time points: before they enter an intervention, immediately after, and approximately one year from the date that divorce papers were filed. Measures assess three general areas of functioning: child adjustment, parent coping and family environment and interaction. More specifically, the children are given the Self Observation Scales (SOS) by Stenner and Katzenmeyer (1974), a measure of self esteem and school affiliation. They also complete the Children's Manifest Anxiety Scale (Reynolds and Richmond, 1978, What I Think and Feel Test). In addition to these, we are piloting a test of children's thoughts and feelings about divorce, the Myths About Divorce (MAD) Scale. This scale assesses the extent to which children blame themselves for the divorce or continue to feel they can effect reconciliation. The schools are also sent a questionnaire on each child. The primary home (custodial) parent completes the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (Eyberg and Ross, 1978), as well as a measure of parenting style (Dibble and Cohen, 1974). The parent also completes the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis, 1977), a measure of anxiety and depression. Measures of family functioning include the Family Environment Scale (Moos, et. al., 1974) and a videotaped play interaction which is rated using an adaptation of Reid and Patterson's rating system (Reid, 1974).

Interventions

At pre-testing families are randomly assigned to one of three interventions: Parent education groups, Family education or the Self Study group. (The children's group was suspended after the first year due to sample size constraints.) The parent groups are structured psycho-educational support groups conducted by the staff of the local mental health center. The groups meet for five weekly sessions and leaders follow a structured outline of topics and materials. Topics discussed include information about the effects of divorce on children, the parenting skills of active listening, limit setting and negotiation, and information about how to reduce hostility between ex-spouses and to promote workable co-parental relationships. In the family education approach, the single parent and children meet together as a family for six sessions. As in the other groups, the focus is on education and support. The family views a film about divorce, plays structured games to improve communication, and discusses family routines and fun activities. Though the leaders follow a structured outline of topics, this approach allows the leaders to tailor the program more for each family. In the children's groups, children meet for 8 one-hour sessions. Using play and puppets, the children discuss the typical reactions of children to divorce, feelings about changes in the family, and how to make visits go more smoothly. Families in the educational materials group receive a book to read (Gardner, 1977; Parent Book About Divorce).

RESULTS

Participating Families

To date, approximately 60 families have participated in interventions. Preliminary data analysis has been begun for a group of 35 families. The families are predominantly middle and lower middle class; 82% are white, and

and 18% are black. All of the study families have been separated for at least 12 months before entering into the programs; the model length of separation is 13 months. In the preliminary analysis group, 32 of the participating primary home parents are women and 3 are men. The majority of the children see their second home parent no more than twice per month: 6% never visit, 27% less than once a month, 33% twice a month; while a smaller number have more frequent contact: 18% once a week or more, and 12% are in joint custody where contact is regular and frequent between the two homes.

Major Problem Areas Between Divorced Parents

Major conflict areas between former spouses are visitation, child support and the amount of involvement that the second home parent has with the children. Interestingly, custody and alimony were not high conflict areas for our sample. However, approximately one third were dissatisfied with child support and visitation arrangements. Parents also reported a significant decrease in the amount of involvement that their former spouses have with the children, which is another source of ongoing friction. When asked "How much responsibility does your former spouse share in raising the children", 50% of parents reported "None". 50% also expressed strong dissatisfaction with the amount of co-parental responsibility taken by the second parent.

Pre-Test Adjustment and Feelings of Family Members

Preliminary findings suggest that children in our study show no more anxiety than others their age on the What I Think and Feel Test (Reynolds and Richmond, 1978). In addition, their self esteem (Self Observation Scales) is equal to that of the general population of school children on three of four scales. However, on the SOS School Affiliation Scale, the distribution of children's scores was negatively skewed. Inspection of the distribution shows that most children score at the national mean, but a small group fall more than -1SD below the national mean. Thus, a small, but important group of children are less identified with school than other children. Further, 65% of parents report that their children had problems in school. Pre-test parent ratings on the Eyburg Child Behavior Inventory indicate that 56% of all the children have more than 11 problem behaviors, Eyburg's cutoff score. However, on the intensity ratings of problem behaviors only 15% scored above Eyburg's cutoff of 127. One possible source of problem behaviors emerges from the data: 45% of the parents reported that their children behaved "worse" or "much worse" after a visit, whereas only 18% behaved "better" or "much better". Thus, the findings tend to suggest that children's problems following divorce may be more interpersonal than intrapsychic, seen in behavior rather than self esteem or anxiety, and may be related to post-divorce family life.

Parents' scores on the Brief Symptom Inventory reveal that 13 months after separation, parents continue to feel significantly more sad and unhappy than the national average. 54% of the parents scored +1SD above the national mean.

On a measure of family functioning, the Family Environment Scale (FES), parents and children 10 and up rated their families as similar to the national sample on most of the FES scales. Further analysis of the FES and the videotape measure of family functioning is in progress.

Support-Seeking in the Families

Most parents have turned to others for "Help in handling the children" (88%). Sources of support are wide and varied including family (45%), friends (57%), counselors (49%), pastors (31%), and school (teachers, 40%, school counselors, 34%). Parents reported that their children sought support somewhat less frequently (70%) mainly from friends (32%), and school (teachers, 21%, school counselors, 20%). Families who had a child currently in therapy were excluded from the study, as were families in which the parent was seeking therapy rather than preventive education.

Preliminary Post-Test Findings

Post test findings were analyzed with particular emphasis on the changes made by children and parents who scored outside the normal range at pre-test on any given test instrument. The thrust of this preliminary analysis was to see if clinically significant changes occurred. Because of small sample sizes in some cells, all subjects were pooled for this initial look at the findings.

On the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory, 56% of the children were rated as having a clinically significant number of problems at pre-test. At post-test, only 25% of children in the 7-9 age group were still rated above the clinical cutoff. In the 10-12 year olds, 42% were still above the clinical cutoff. No children got worse from pre to post-testing. Thus the younger children changed considerably more from pre- to post-testing. On the measure of children's anxiety, the What I Think and Feel, 19% scored +1SD above the mean at pre-test. at post-test, only 5% still scored as highly anxious.

Parent ratings of anxiety and depression on the Brief Symptom Inventory showed little change from pre- to post-testing. On the BSI Anxiety scale, approximately 34% of the sample was anxious at pre-test. At post-test, 38% reparted anxiety +1SD above the mean of the normal national group. On the BSI Depression Scale, 54% rated themselves as sad and unhappy at pre-test, and 48% at post-test.

Analysis of pre-post changes on other measures, such as family functioning, parenting style and family environment are not yet complete. One year follow-ups of families are still in progress as well.

DISCUSSION

Our findings to date suggest that we are reaching a sample of normal divorcing families who are functioning well in some areas despite continued family conflict and stress. About one year after separation, the children are not particularly anxious, nor is their self esteem lower than other children their ages. A cluster of problems seem to occur in behavior and in school. Similar findings were also reported by Wallerstein and Kelly (1979). Parents show signs of continuing stress, particularly in their BSI depression scores. It is of note that families participate in the study during the time when their divorces are coming up in the courts and becoming finalized. Many parents report that this is an especially stressful time for them.

Despite this stress, it appears that the educational programs have some effects on the family. Children's problem behaviors decrease markedly, and they report somewhat less anxiety at the second round of testing. Perhaps the programs which focus on parenting skills and family communication are having the desired effect on the functioning of the children and family - without lessening some of the other stresses which might cause parent depression and anxiety to remain high.

As our study is still in progress and recruitment of families is continuing, the findings reported here are still quite tentative. However, we have been interested to note that many of our findings are similar to those of other more clinical studies conducted elsewhere (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1979). Between group comparisons of the different interventions will be investigated later in the coming year.

Our recruitment experience suggests that divorcing families are highly mobile and over extended. Despite the ongoing level of stress, they are very responsive to non-judgemental, non-psychiatric approaches emphasizing health rather than pathology. Our experience also suggests that research and programs need to take account of variations in the timing of separation and divorce resulting from differences in state laws. Families appear to need different things at different time points in the divorce process, perhaps including educational programs well into the second year.

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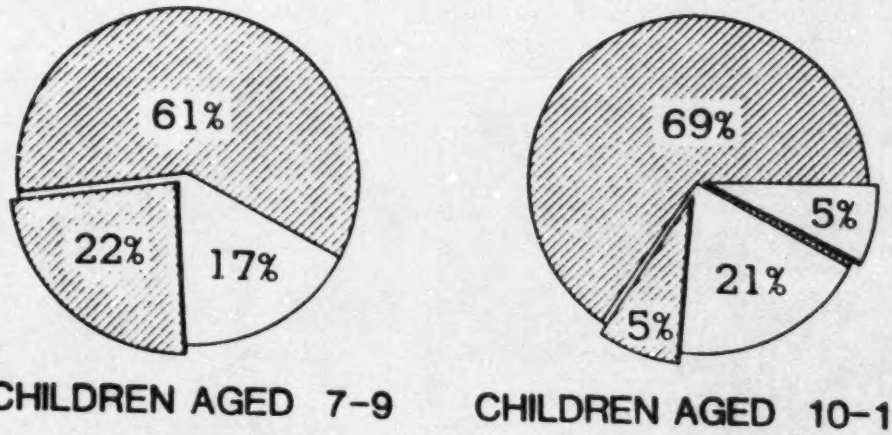
FIGURE 1

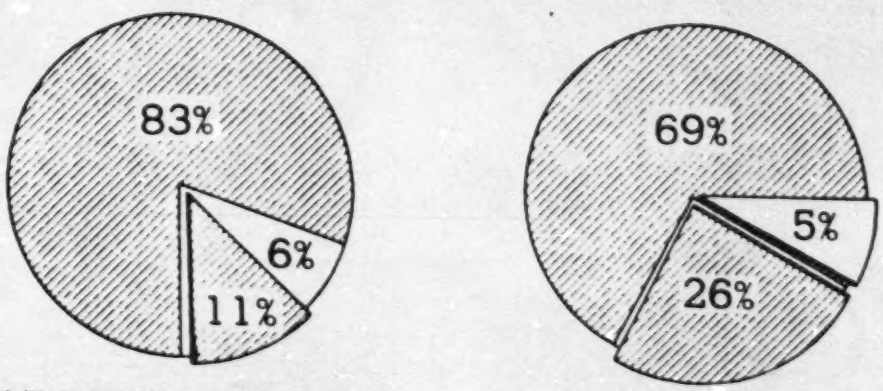
Most children checked less than 3 myths about divorce at pre-test. Some change was observed at post-test, especially in the 7-9 age group.



CHILDREN AGED 7-9 CHILDREN AGED 10-12

▨ < 3 myths about divorce ☐ ≥ 3 myths about divorce
Projecting slices indicate % of scores changing category at post-test.

Most of the children significantly more anxious than the normal population at pre-test (the upper 16%) were in the normal range at post-test.

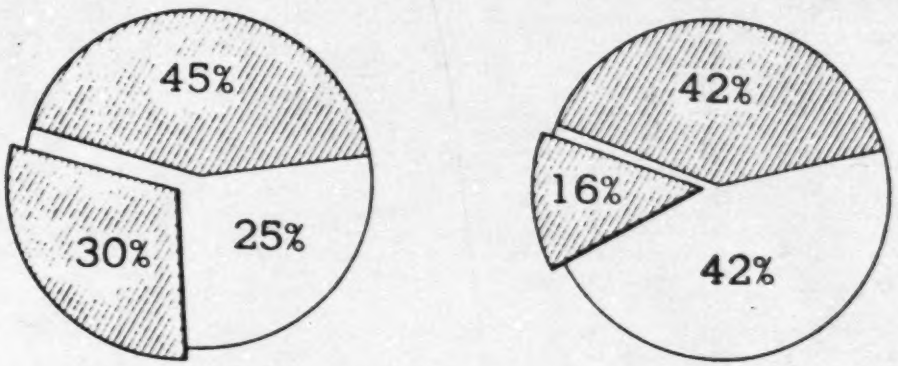


CHILDREN AGED 7-9 CHILDREN AGED 10-12

▨ anxiety in normal range ☐ clinically signifant level of anxiety
Projecting slices indicate scores which changed category at post-test.

FIGURE 2

At pre-test parents reported 56% of the children to have a clinically significant number of problem behaviors. At post-test only 33% still showed problems. The greatest amount of change occurred in the 7-9 age group.



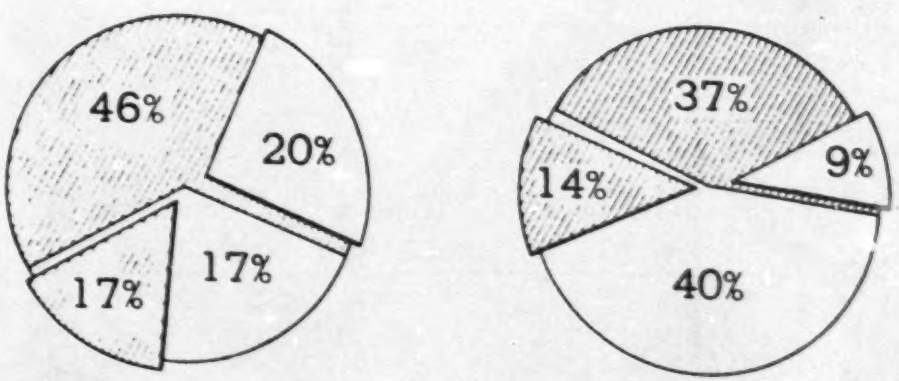
CHILDREN AGED 7-9 CHILDREN AGED 10-12

Normal number of problem behaviors

Clinically significant number of problem behaviors

Projecting slices indicate % of scores changing category at post-test.

Parent anxiety and depression tended to change little over time.



PARENT ANXIETY PARENT DEPRESSION

Normal amount of anxiety or depression for a non-clinical population

Above normal amount of anxiety or depression for a non-clinical population

Projecting slices indicate % of scores changing category at post-test.